

OR-134-02-EA-01

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

for

PETRIFIED RIDGE SEEDING

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

SPOKANE DISTRICT

Prepared by Wenatchee Field Office Staff
October 2001

INTRODUCTION

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) acquired part of the Billingsley Ranch in late September of 2001. Approximately 78 acres of the acquired area was used for growing wheat. The 78 acres is in two parcels in T. 22 N., R. 24 E., sections 9 and 18. There are approximately 52 acres in section 9 and 26 acres in section 18. These parcels were part of a privately larger wheat field that remains in cultivation. The parcels lie in Grant County approximately 17 miles northwest of Ephrata Washington in the Moses Coulee area. See the attached maps for the location of the project.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the project is to return the cultivated parcels to shrub steppe, a mix of perennial grasses, shrubs and forbs. The project is being done to help fulfill the following goals of the acquisition: benefit wildlife habitat, native plant community potential and public recreation values. In addition, the BLM is a wildland management agency and not mandated to cultivate or authorize cultivation of the public lands, except in limited circumstances. The seeding is also necessary to prevent the invasion of these parcels with noxious weeds and other weedy species. If weedy species were allowed to dominate the sites, establishment of beneficial species would be more difficult. In addition, the weed dominated sites would become a source of infestation for the adjacent lands.

Description of Alternatives

Alternative 1 Proposed Action

Seed 78 acres with improved varieties of native perennial grasses. Allow sagebrush to re-establish naturally on the parcels. Native forbs and sagebrush may be planted in the area depending on availability and natural reintroduction.

An air drill will be used to plant the grass seed to a depth of no more than ½ inch. The seed will be drilled into the standing stubble in the fall of 2001. Forbs and shrubs may transplanted or planted from seed.

Three quarters of a mile of fence will be constructed to protect and delineate the area to be seeded. The parcels are currently fenced on three sides.

Alternative 2 Current Authorization (No Action)

Do not seed the area and leave the standing wheat stubble. Allow the area to re-vegetate without intervention.

Alternative 3 Continue Wheat Production

Issue a 3 year permit to authorize the current operators to continue the cultivation of the land for wheat production.

Affected Environment & Environmental Impacts

Introduction

As discussed above the parcels to be seeded are currently in standing wheat stubble. There is no native vegetation on the area to be seeded. The land has been cultivated for at least 30 years, as is evidenced by the 1971 Conservation Plan Map.

Vegetation/Plant Communities and Special Status Plant Species

Affected Environment

The cultivated area is adjacent to the native big sagebrush/blue bunch wheatgrass and stiff sagebrush/Sandberg's bluegrass plant communities. The native big sagebrush/blue bunch wheatgrass community is the dominant plant community with stiff sagebrush/Sandberg's bluegrass community existing on the shallow rocky soils in the area. Exotic weed species were observed at the edges of the wheat fields. These species included cheatgrass, Russian knapweed, kochia and tumble mustard.

Environmental Consequences

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action)

The proposed action will result in the establishment of native perennial grasses that will replace the wheat. Seeding will reduce the opportunity for invasion of the site with noxious weeds and other weedy non-native species. The seeding will result in a increase in the diversity of plant species by replacing the wheat monoculture with a mix of native perennial species.

Alternative 2 (No Action)

The area currently in standing wheat stubble if untreated will gradually re-vegetate with pioneer species which will be primarily weeds. Russian knapweed, cheatgrass, kochia and tumble mustard were observed within the cultivated area. It is anticipated that these weedy species and possibly big sagebrush will come to dominate the site. Russian knapweed will probably dominant in the mesic sites with cheatgrass and tumble mustard dominant in the drier areas.

Alternative 3 (Continue Cultivation)

There will be no change if cultivation is allowed to continue.

Riparian/Water Resources

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

There are no riparian resources or surface waters affected by the project. The proposed action may result in a small reduction of run-off and erosion.

Wildlife Habitat

Affected Environment

The parcels to be seeded do not provide significant habitat for wildlife due to cultivation. Some wildlife species may derive food resources from the cultivated areas. Wildlife species observed in the adjacent sage steppe include mule deer, chukar, and white tailed jack rabbits.

Environmental Consequences

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action)

The proposed action will result in the additional high quality habitat for the wildlife species that use the adjacent sage steppe.

Alternative 2 (No Action)

This alternative will result in the additional low quality habitat for the wildlife species that use the adjacent sage steppe.

Alternative 3 (Continue Cultivation)

No change.

Fisheries Resources

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

No known fisheries resources exist on the parcels to be seeded or the adjacent area, therefore no adverse impacts are anticipated under any of the alternatives.

Cultural Resources and Native American Values

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

No known cultural resources exist on the parcels to be seeded, therefore no adverse impacts are anticipated under any of the alternatives. The proposed action may result in an increase in plants of cultural significance.

Paleontological Values

Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

No paleontological resources are known to be located on the area to be seeded. None of the alternatives is expected to impact paleontological resources.

Recreation

Affected Environment

Prior to the acquisition, little recreation occurred on the parcel since they were cultivated and in private ownership. Some incidental hunting may have occurred on the area.

Environmental Consequences

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action)

The proposed action may result in additional recreation use as wildland values such as wildlife use and plant diversity increase. Due to the small size of the parcels, the increase in recreational values may not be significant.

Alternative 2 (No Action)

No significant change in recreational value is anticipated to occur under this alternative. Some decrease in visual resource values may occur due to the infestation of the site with noxious weeds and other invader species.

Alternative 3 (Continue Cultivation)

No change in recreation value.

Other Resource Values or Elements Considered

Environmental Justice

No disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority or low-income populations are expected to result from implementation of any of the alternatives addressed in this EA.

Other Resource Elements Considered

Other resource values or elements considered in analyzing the alternatives included:

- Air quality
- Wild and scenic rivers
- Prime/unique farmlands
- Special area designations
- Wilderness
- Hazardous/solid materials

Air quality would not be affected. The project area is not prime or unique farmland as it adjacent to larger blocks of agricultural lands. None of the other elements listed above are known to occur on the parcels.

Person's, Groups or Agencies Consulted

In an effort to identify areas of potential concern to Native American people, the BLM initiated consultation regarding the proposed lease renewal with the Colville Confederated Tribes through letters dated October 16, 2001.

Consultation and coordination with the current agricultural operator and adjacent landowners has been accomplished through telephone conversations.

Tom and Mike Heer, Wheat Farmer
Dave Billingsley, Livestock Operator
Office of Historic Preservation
Natural Resource Conservation Service